

# **Disability and Traditional Shona Societies: A Reflection on Disability in the Shona**

## **Folktales and Taboos**

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### **Abstract**

*Disability among the traditional Shona societies was perceived with mixed attitudes and feelings. At one time the Shona would view disability with an abusive and denigrating attitude while at other times they would discourage the abuse and ill-treatment of people with disability. The Shona may view people with disabilities with suspicion because it is generally agreed that such mishaps are related to certain actions or non-actions by parents or family members. The punishment and retribution of vadzimu (ancestors) can be manifested in the form of deformities in the children of the offending persons. Disability is also blamed on the works of jealous witches who do not want to see a certain family having able-bodied children. The diversity of Shona people's attitudes towards people living with disability has been and is exhibited through taboos and folktales. It is in light of this view that this paper is set to reflect on the rich legacy of traditional Shona taboos and folktales and see the extent to which they exhibit both negative and positive attitudes of the Shona people towards people with disability. The paper will start by giving the beliefs of the Shona people on the types and causes of disability and then proceed to give Shona taboos and folktales which either accommodate or denigrate people with disability. Document and story analysis methods will be used to glean data for this paper.*

**Key words:** Taboos, folktales, attitude, Vadzimu (ancestors), traditional, witches, jealous, knowledge base, values, moral codes, worldviews

### **Introduction**

Disability has been defined and perceived differently by different people depending on the culture, context, knowledge base, situation, beliefs and values of society and people defining

it. While disability is understood to be a result of biological damage to a particular part of the body that results in a person having impairments, people living with disability are further impaired by factors within their environments (Choruma, 2006). Choruma (2006) further reiterated that societal attitudes towards people living with disability can further handicap individuals with reactions ranging from horror, fear, anxiety, distaste, and hostility through patronizing behaviour. Be that as it may, this paper is an exploration into the traditional Shona people's taboos and folktales with regards to disability. It is imperative to note that traditional Shona people's beliefs, moral codes, world views, attitudes and perspectives were fostered in their legacy of taboos, ridicules and folktales. Navigation into the traditional Shona taboos and folktales would clearly show their attitudes, perspectives and views towards disability. At times, the Shona would view disability with abusive and denigrating attitudes while at other times they would discourage the abuse and ill-treatment of people with disability. There are taboos and folktales which accommodate people living with disability and, at the same time, there are also taboos and folktales which disregard disability. The paper starts by giving a snapshot of the beliefs of the traditional Shona people on the types and causes of disability and then proceeds to give Shona taboos and folktales which either accommodate or denigrate people living with disability. The paper ends by giving the general lessons about attitudes towards disability that modern society can learn from traditional Shona societies.

## **Objectives**

This article is set to:

- Provide a general perception of the traditional Shona people towards people living with disability
- Identify folklores and taboos which give a holistic view of people living with disability
- Explore the beliefs of traditional Shona people on the types and causes of disability

- Examine the ways used by traditional Shona societies to integrate and accommodate people living with disability
- Identify specific areas the modern society can glean and integrate from traditional society so as to improve and champion the recognition and inclusion of people living with disability

### **Statement of the problem**

The traditional Shona societies had means and mechanisms to integrate and accommodate people living with disability. This was done in forms of folklores where either people or animals which represent people living with disability were given space to showcase their abilities to save the family, tribe, friends or the whole community. This article is meant to identify the folklores and taboos which engage disability and spell out what modern society can glean from the traditional Shona society regarding inclusion and integration of people living with disability.

### **Literature review**

Generally, disability is defined and perceived differently according to the culture, context, knowledge base, beliefs, and values of a society. The negative social implications of disability have been expressed as the “social exclusion and oppression experienced by people with impairment” (Barnes & Mercer, 2005:1).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) (1996) defines disability as “any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in a manner or within a range considered normal for a human being”.

The (Zimbabwe) Department of Social Services (1982:8) define disability as “a physical or mental condition, which makes it difficult or impossible for the person concerned to adequately

fulfil his or her normal role in society”. The Zimbabwean government (1996:51) defines a disabled person as “a person with a physical, mental or sensory disability, including a visual, hearing or speech functional disability, which gives rise to physical, cultural or social barriers inhibiting him from participating at an equal level with other members of society in activities, undertakings or fields of employment that are open to other members of society.” Whyte and Ingstad (1995: 5) defined disability as “any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function.”

From these definitions, it is important to note that disability is multi-dimensional and that disability in one dimension does not necessarily imply disability in other categories. While a disability is understood to be a result of physiological damage to a particular part of the human body that results in a person having impairment, such impairment contributes to difficulties experienced by that person, and interrupts his /her functioning as a person. In addition, people with disabilities are often further disabled by factors within their environments.

**Taboos (*Zviera*)** are strong sanctions that discourage certain forms of human behaviour (Tatira, 2000). Tatira (200) also defined taboos (*zviera*) as ‘avoidance rules’ that forbid members of the human community from performing certain actions, such as eating some kinds of food, walking on or visiting some sites that are regarded as sacred, cruelty to animals, and using environmental resources in an unsustainable manner. For the Shona people, taboos are understood as specific rules that forbid people from performing certain actions in certain areas and situations. Taboos are Shona people’s moral codes which monitor human actions. The violators of the moral code, as contained in taboos, are said to invite misfortunes for themselves and the community at large in the form of bad luck, disease, drought, and even death.

Folktale or folklore (*ngano*) are traditional stories and legends transmitted orally from generation to generation (Hodza, 1980:3). *Ngano* are also understood as traditional customs,

beliefs, stories, and deductive/didactic sayings that were taught to youngsters during the evening so as to introduce them to full world views, beliefs and values of the Shona people (Hodza, 1980). *Ngano* were passed down generations verbally by the storyteller (*Sarungano*) who usually was an old woman past child bearing age.

### **Methodological approaches**

The phenomenological method was employed as a chief paradigm in data collection and analysis in this study. The method is sometimes known as the comparative study of religion. It has its history in the writings of Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938), who sought to develop a new philosophical method which would lend certainty to a disintegrating civilisation (Eagleton, 1983:54). Husserl rejected the belief that objects in the external world exist independently and that the information about objects is reliable. He argued that people can be certain about how things appear in (or present themselves to) their consciousness (Eagleton, 1983; Fouche, 1993). For Eagleton (1983), to arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored and, in this way, the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness. Realities are thus treated as pure ‘phenomena’ and the only absolute data from where to begin. Historically, the phenomenological method grew in Western culture as a reaction to the idea that human behaviour can be controlled by scientific methods.

The aim of phenomenology is the return to the concrete, captured by the slogan ‘back to the things themselves!’ (Eagleton, 1983: 56). Bentz and Shapiro (1998), and Kensit (2000:104) maintain that the researcher must allow the data to emerge. For them, using phenomenology means capturing rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings. This implies that the phenomenological method is an attempt to capture experience in process as lived, through descriptive analysis. It studies how things appear to consciousness or are given in experience and its answers bring us closer to the phenomenon that is lived (Kensit, 2000:104). It is a

method of learning about people by listening to their descriptions of what their subjective world is like for them, together with an attempt to understand this in their own terms as fully as possible, free of the researcher's preconceptions and interferences (Kensit, 2000:104). This implies that the phenomenological method compels the researcher to continually examine and re-examine his or her biases and presuppositions. In the phenomenological method, one has to work with the assumption, "I want to understand your world through your eyes and your experiences as far as possible, and together we can probe your experiences fully and understand them" (Kensit, 2000:104).

The basic principle in the phenomenological method is the act of bracketing or suspending or setting aside biases, everyday understandings, theories, beliefs, habitual modes of thought, and judgments. Bracketing is part of the larger process of *epoche* (Kensit, 2000). Basically, the phenomenological method intends to identify phenomena through the perceptions of the players in a particular situation. In most cases, this is done through inductive and qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions and participant observation, and representing data from the perspective of the research participants. This implies that the phenomenological method is all about studying human experiences from an individual's perspective. It calls in the idea of bracketing preconceived assumptions. The phenomenological method is rooted in personal knowledge and subjective paradigm and puts more emphasis on personal perceptions and interpretations. It is for this reason that Lester (1999:1) said that the phenomenological method is powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom. This implies that the phenomenological method is effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives.

For Giorgi (1985), the operative word in phenomenological research is 'describe'. This clearly shows that the aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon,

refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts. On the same note, Welman and Kruger (1999: 189) said that phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved. The method, according to (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000: 488-489), is geared toward the ways in which ordinary members of society attend to their everyday lives. This means that a researcher applying phenomenology is concerned with the lived experiences of the people involved, or who were involved with the issue that is being researched (Greene, 1997; Holloway, 1997; Kruger, 1988; Kvale, 1996; Maypole & Davies, 2001; Robinson & Reed, 1998). Merriam (2009:5) argues that qualitative researchers have an interest in understanding the way people interpret their experiences and how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. According to Van Manem (1990), phenomenology uses inductive research methods to comprehend universally-lived experiences. In the same vein, Omery (1983:53) argues that the phenomenological method assumes the whole as most likely to be quite different from the sum of its parts. Hammersley (2000) posits that phenomenologists believe the researcher cannot be detached from his or her own presuppositions and that the researcher should not pretend otherwise. In this regard, Mouton and Marais (1990:12) state that individual researchers “hold explicit beliefs”, hence the need to bracket them.

All in all, the phenomenological method is an enterprise which is preoccupied with bringing to the fore differences and similarities between two or more entities, be it historical epochs, personalities, events or components. For Cox (1996:26) phenomenology as a research paradigm calls the researcher to suspend or bracket previous ideas, thoughts, opinions, and beliefs about the community under study. By doing so, the researcher will be able to observe the phenomena as they appear rather than as they are understood through opinions formed prior to observation. Academic theories about the nature, function, purpose or meaning of religion must also be suspended or bracketed (Cox, 1996:27).

## Research findings

### Types of disability in Shona societies

Traditional Shona societies acknowledge different forms of disability. For the Shona, one can be born with disability (*urema hwekuberekwa nahwo kana kuti urema hwaMwari*). This form of disability is thought to have come from God. The other form of disability is *urema hwekuroyiwa* (meaning disability caused by witchcraft). This form is thought to have been caused by enemies (*vavengi*), or by evil spirits (*mweya yakaipa*). The last form of disability is *urema hwekukuvara kana kukuvadzwa* (disability caused by accidents). In most cases, ancestral spirits (*midzimu*) and alien spirits (*mashavi*) are blamed for accident-related disability. So, for the Shona, there are different disabilities which encompass:

- *upofu*- Inability to see, blindness
- *mbeveve* - Inability to speak
- *matsi* - Inability to hear and to speak, deaf and dumb
- *Chimumumu* - Inability to speak.
- *mhetamakumbo* –Inability to walk on account of crippled legs
- *kurwara nepfungwa* –Mental illness
- *musope*- Albinism

Like in most African societies, in the Shona societies people with disabilities appear to be less accepted into the community particularly if the individual cannot contribute economically to the family or the community. Among the Shona, individuals are described by how well they integrate into social and communal life (Ogechi & Ruto, 2002). Rather, as in all African communities, integration into communal life relates to how well individuals fit within the social



norms and, importantly, if they can do their share in the community, whether or not they have a disability. However, in Shona communities there are other forms of disabilities which are tolerated and accepted. In most cases, disabilities from birth and those which came later in life through accidents are much tolerated. More to this, the extent or intensity of disability also attains one acceptance or rejection in the community. Among the Shona, people with physical, hearing, and visual impairments are not seen as categorically different from others, but simply as people with a specific impairment (Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2004). So, the Shona only see people with disabilities as “abnormal” if they are unable to carry out daily societal chores or activities. This entails that if people with disabilities were able to take part in communal activities and rituals, they were more likely accepted. So, the ability to participate in communal activities and rituals increased traditional Shona social standing. This is the major reason why in the traditional Shona everyone had a role.

### **Causes of disability**

Several negative beliefs on the causes of disabilities persist among the Shona. In most cases, disability was associated with witchcraft or maternal promiscuity. Generally, the birth of a child with disability was viewed as a taboo that was likely to bring bad omen to the family and community at large. Mothers were usually blamed for the disability of their children. They attributed disabilities to punishment from the gods or bad omens. There were also taboos that, when broken, were thought to cause disability. For example, it is wrong to kill animals without good reason during a wife’s pregnancy (Ogechi & Ruto, 2002). Having sexual intercourse during pregnancy is also a taboo, which can cause the child to have a disability (Hartley et al., 2005).

Laughing at people with disabilities could cause an individual to have a child with disability. Rather, such an act causes an accident to befall you, or cause future generations in your family

to be cursed (Ogechi & Ruto, 2002; Talle, 1995). Misdeeds of family members can also cause disability. Family members can do something wrong and the family can be punished for the act by giving birth to a child with disability (Ogechi & Ruto, 2002). Teferra (2003:3) recorded an incident where a father blamed his wife for causing their child's disability after she complained about seeing a person with distorted features in the street. In other cases, when the mistake of the family member is thought to be very bad to the community and they decide to keep it a secret, a child is born deaf or mute as punishment for concealing a family wrong (Omiegbe, 2001).

Divine intervention can also cause disability. The Shona believed that Mwari (God) can either bless or curse families by giving them children without or with disabilities respectively. In several instances, although disability was accepted as a medical mishap, this explanation was accompanied by the belief that divine intervention caused the accident (Mashiri, 2000). Deliverer (1999a), Kiyaga and Moores (2003) recorded situations where parents of children with disabilities explained that their child was a gift from God or that was God's will for a child to have a disability. In some instances, the traditional Shona believed that disabilities were caused by diseases. In summary, the Shona uphold that disability is caused by witchcraft, punishment from God, curse of ancestors, immorality, disobedience and accidents.

### **Shona folktales and disability**

The traditional Shona folktales (*ngano*) were passed down generations verbally by the storyteller (*sarungano*) who usually was an old woman past child bearing age. The Shona culture upholds these old story tellers as custodians of wisdom and knowledge hence were trusted with the task to educate youngsters to be well versed with Shona beliefs, culture and worldviews (Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2004). *Ngano* was a way of passing down codified religious and cultural messages to children to prepare them for the adult ritualistic society. *Ngano*

offered a curriculum that prepared children for their present and adult life, a curriculum that presented the young ones into the worldviews, perceptions, cultural beliefs and morals of the Shona. Traditional Shona folktales indicated two perspectives in so far as disability was concerned. On one hand, there is a positive view which accepted and accommodated disability while, on the other hand disability, was shunned and rejected.

It is important to note at this point that disabilities from (*uremahwa Mwari*) were accepted. Disabilities which were accepted include physical hearing, mute, one handed people, those who cannot talk and those with partial visual impairments. These were accepted because the individuals were able to carry out daily activities and look after their families. Disabilities that were not accepted include blindness, lameness and being bedridden. Such individuals had nothing to contribute to the family and community at large.

The perspectives and attitudes of the Shona towards people living with disability were almost always shown through folktales. Important to note is the use of animals to often portray human behaviour and deeds. The animals used include the hare, tortoise, frog and so forth. These small animals were used to refer to people with bodily deformities but capable of providing for their families and carrying out communal responsibilities. There were also animals such as the baboon, lion, elephant, hippopotamus and so forth, which were used to represent people without disabilities. This is the reason why Shona folktales had numerous examples of individuals of low birth who were called upon to do *Mwari's* work. They had many folktales showing how the lower and despised animals like the frog, tortoise and hare were humble, meekly and witty. In times of crises, the lower and despised animals were often called upon to save the animal kingdom. During the great drought in the animal kingdom it was the frog that found water after every other animal had failed in their attempts to dig up a well. It was the tortoise that finally brought hare (the witty and trickster) to book after all the other animals had been cheated by the cunning trickster. The following stories are examples of how the Shona

perceived people with disability. However, although some of the words used in these stories are derogatory, this paper is more concerned about the perception of disability without paying attention to how the words are derogatory towards disability.

Among the Shona there is the story of *Harurwa* (the one-eyed monster). Harurwa was born with deformities and was starved, abused and bullied as a kid but rose to be an exceptional leader. Hodza, (1987:62) gave the story of Chinyamapezi (the pimped one) who was despised and mocked for his appearance but became a shining star. The story of Chinyamapezi tells of a king who had a beautiful daughter whom he was ready to marry to a man who could climb a big thorny tree without any pause to rest or fear of pain. Many big, strong and better looking men tried their best but failed to climb to the top because the tree was too thorny. One day an ugly one eyed pimped man called Chinyamapezi decided to try his luck. The big, strong and better looking men laughed when they saw him coming to try his luck. The king gave him a chance to try. Chinyamapezi started climbing and endured the pain until he climbed to the top and came down. The king gave him his daughter and helped this ugly one-eyed man to improve his life. They lived a happy life with his wife and family thereafter.

The other folktale which accommodates people living with disability is called *The River Girl*. This story mentions of a small bodied, ugly and big headed boy (Gelfand, 1985:113). The story states that once upon a time there was a beautiful girl admired by everyone but she lived by a river. One day a certain young man arrived and was nicely greeted. Struck by the girl's beauty he started to propose love. The girl told him that she can only marry a man who can carry her to his home without resting along the way. The young man took it as a simple task and carried her home. Before he could move half way home, the young man became tired and told the girl that he needed to rest and proceed later. The girl reminded him of the rule not to rest her on the way but since he was tired the man put the girl down and she mysteriously disappeared leaving a pool of water which was not there before. The young man was disappointed and he narrated

the ordeal to everyone in the village and all young men intended to try their luck. Many came but they rested along the way and the girl disappeared the same way. One day a small bodied, ugly young man with a big head decided to try his luck. Those who had tried to take the girl laughed at him saying, “If the bigger, stronger and better looking men failed, what do you a small, ugly, and big head think you can do?” This mockery gave the boy the urge and courage to try his luck. He carried the girl and struggled with the heavy load but never put her down or rested until he arrived at his home. All the people could not believe their eyes. The boy’s mother was overjoyed to have a beautiful daughter-in-law. The girl was smart and hard-working and she helped to improve the status of her husband. From that day people started to respect this small bodied, ugly young man with a big headed.

There is also a story of five men who could turn into lions (*varume vaisanduka kuita shumba*) (Gelfand, 1985:110). This story narrates that the men went to a particular village looking for girls. They found the girls and proposed love. After following all the necessary procedures they married and went with the girls to their homes. One of the girls had a one-legged brother who also insisted to go together with his sister. The sister refused because she feared the burden to look after him. The other girls later on encouraged her to take the crippled boy with her. When they arrived where the boys lived, the boys would at times go for hunting and bring their wives a lot of meat. One day the crippled boy made a basket of tree barks and decided to follow the boys flying in the air to see how they were hunting. The crippled boy discovered that the boys who had married the girls from his village turned into lions as they were hunting. He narrated his discovery to their wives but they did not listen or believe him. One day the men went hunting and the crippled boy followed as usual. On this day, the men did not catch anything and they were hungry. They decided to go and devour their wives for them to quench their hunger. The crippled boy realised this and he flew to the girls and informed them. At first the girls did not believe him but when they saw lions coming they ran to get into the basket which

the crippled boy had made. The crippled boy started singing his song and the basket started to fly. The song goes:

*“Basket, go up*

*Basket, go up”*

The basket flew up and he saved the girls from the lions.

In another story *Pimbirimano* (one born through the knee) tells of a young man who was handicapped and one-eyed and was born through the knee. This young man was born holding a horn with which he used to do magic. One day the community was attacked by enemies and the king consulted Pimbirimano to help them with his magic. The enemies saw themselves being attacked by stones from *Pimbirimano’s* magic and they started to run away. From that day, the king made Pimbirimano his deputy.

*Runyemba rwaChihobobo* (a man with a cowpea tree) is another story which tells of a man who was crippled but had a cowpea tree which he could use to climb to and from heaven.

*Tsuro na Gudo* (hare and baboon) taken from (Hodza, 1987:30) is the other story which also feature the Shona’s acceptance of people with disability. *Gudo* represents the able-bodied while the hare represents the weak and people with disability. The hare always triumphs over the baboon, implying that people living with disability are capable of doing something better than the able-bodied.

### **Taboos and disability in traditional Shona societies**

The language, culture and beliefs of the Shona is rich in its making. The traditional Shona always talked in riddles, taboos (*zviera*) and witty (*denhe reruzivo*) sayings in their day to day lives. To foster good morals, they always used taboos. In their taboos one can also see their worldviews, beliefs and perspectives about disability. There are taboos associated with all

forms of disability. It is generally felt among the Shona that one should not laugh at people living with disability or the curse may be transferred to you (Machingura & Masengwe, 2014). The Shona have their celebrated saying which is; '*Seka urema wafa.*' (You dare laugh at disability only after you are dead). This literally means that if you laugh at a person with disability, you will either bear crippled children or you can be crippled yourself.

The Shona also uphold a taboo which states that, *Chirema ndochinezano, chinotamba chakasendama madziro* (a cripple is clever, he supports himself against a wall when dancing). This saying accepts that people living with disability can do something using what they are. It portrays people living with disability as people who can tap much from the environment around them for survival. The other Shona saying states that if a fool is a member of your own family you applaud his dancing (*benzi kunge riri rako kudzana kwaro unopururudza*). The Shona also say '*Benzi raka reva hondo*' meaning a fool warned people on an impending war and those who despised his advice were attacked and killed.

From the examples given so far, we can deduce that *ngano* (folktales) and taboos were loaded with cultural, moral and religious motif that taught the children to respect all God's creations irrespective of age, looks or any other physical attributes or deformities. The central theme being, if one does good things to the downtrodden, people with disability, the widows, the orphans and the wayfarer, one gets blessings from *Mwari* (God). *Ngano* taught the children the importance of charitable work in their own communities hence the adage "charity begins at home". When children saw the old, the poor, and people with disability, the orphans, the widows and the travellers, all they were supposed to see was God not the disadvantaged, and were called upon to assist in whatever way possible. These childhood lessons were the backbone of adult world views and beliefs which put emphasis on care, sharing and hospitality. They taught the children worldviews and beliefs which put the interests of people living with disability before the strong and the family or community. It is because of such an education

and upbringing that makes one to conclude that the Shona had instances where they accepted disability as ability because those with disabilities in the folktales narrated above are shining stars. Ill-treatment of people living with disability was thought to bring upon the perpetrator the misfortune of bearing children with disability. Therefore, through the moral threat that if one were to imitate a lame person one risked being lame as well, people were frightened into respecting people with disabilities. This was enough motivation to discourage people from belittling the humanity of people living with disability despite their biological abnormalities.

The Shona discouraged people from looking down upon members of society who were lame through making disparaging remarks about their biological conditions. Sanctions were enforced through threats that one who goes against the set taboo risked being struck with disability too. Thus, *kunyomba* (abusing or mocking) those with disability was a bad human quality that the Shona normally blame on lack of adequate moral education. A person who belittles another human being on the basis of one's disability lacks *unhu* (morals) and the Shona had a clever way of curtailing such bad habits through appropriate taboos. So, folktales and taboos in the traditional Shona societies proved to be useful by producing young people who were skilful, self-sufficient and cultural inclusive. They produced young people who could put the interests of others before theirs. *Ngano* were tailor-made to suit the local conditions, not being restrictive but holistic and inclusive in subject matter, interactive in approach and dynamic and progressive in perspective. *Ngano* produced tolerant, accommodating and merciful individuals who perceived communalism as a means of survival. Rather, in most instances traditional Shona communities considered disability as a normal abnormality. People living with disability were considered to be part of life and were integrated into the society without negative connotation or perception.



### **Shona taboos and folktales' negatives towards disability**

There are also other stories or folktales among the Shona which shunned people with disability. However, it should be noted that these negatives were meant to produce positive results of accepting people living with disability.

For example, the story of a woman with a crippled son. The crippled son always went into the villages stealing people's cattle and would give only intestines to his mother. The mother was one day angered by his acts and she reported him to the king who ordered that he be put to death. The rationale behind this story was that, we should accept whatever we have been given lest we attract misfortune, especially to those living with disability.

Another story speaks of a pregnant woman who was asked for water by an albino. She gave him water but as soon as he left the woman destroyed the cup. From that pregnancy, the woman gave birth to albinos until her death. The teaching in this story is that we should not despise people who are living with disability lest we fall victim of the same disability.

Another saying which shuns disability is *kumbira, kumbira chirema* (a play in which youngsters would fold their fingers together one on top of the other and start asking someone to help them). If one does not comply with what the child wants, one will give birth to a child with disability when he or she grew up. This implies that disability is for charity, and it can be used to get what you want. However, at the same time one can also say that the play also accommodates people living with disability because it was training the youngsters to be considerate to people with disability.

The Shona also have taboos which state that a pregnant woman should not look at or associate with people with disabilities or they may give birth to children with disabilities. The Shona have a saying '*ukagara nechirema unoita nhodzera.*' In this case the Shona believe in transference of disability to the unborn babies. So, among the Shona a pregnant woman was

not to look at a disabled person. If she does, she had to spit on the ground or on her belly lest she gives birth to a disabled child.

A pregnant woman was supposed to observe certain dietary prescriptions and taboos so as to deliver a child without disabilities. A pregnant woman was not to eat meat from forbidden creatures like a lizard because the child will be born with weak bones hence will not be able to walk. If pregnant women eat sheep meat, the child will be born with bodily weaknesses. The Shona also had the following taboos which were supposed to be followed:

If a man peeps into pots on the fire or into relish dishes he will develop projecting eyebrows.

If a man scrapes a pot to eat the last remains of food, his forehead will grow big.

A grown-up man should not lick the cooking stick (*mugoti*), if he does, he will develop big breasts.

If you eat while asleep you will develop two navels. If girls looked at puppies which have not yet opened their eyes, they will bear blind children when they marry. Boys were not supposed to eat potatoes or pumpkins cooked the previous night lest one of their testicles grew extraordinarily larger than the other.

*Bofu rikati ndino kurova, rinenge rine charaka tsika* - when a blind says I will hit you he has something under his feet. Or a weak man will never attack a stronger one without the help of someone else.

*Rema harina hunza* - a blind man does not inspect a game pit.

*Kune chirema hakuna rufu* - the death of a crippled man is not taken seriously.

If one eats the small grasshoppers' one will become deaf.

If you beat up your mother, you become insane.

*Ukateedzera chirema, unoita chiremawo* (If you imitate a lame person, you will become lame too).

From the taboos and folktales presented here, one can see that at some instances the traditional Shona viewed people with disabilities with suspicion because they generally agreed that such mishaps are causally related to certain actions or non-actions by parents or family members. The Shona believed that disability is ‘contagious’ in that the one who openly laughs at or imitates, for example, the awkward walks of people living with disability one would also become lame. So, because no one wanted the burdens and negative public perception associated with being lame, the Shona were forced to obey the taboos that were sanctioned upon them.

What forced the Shona to obey the taboos sanctioned upon them was the fear of disability. Such fear was a sign of exclusion. The reason behind the mention of disability as retribution for breaking taboos was caused by the disapproval of the condition of people with disability. The traditional Shona obeyed taboos, not because they saw them as good, but because they feared the nature of retribution, that is, disability. This implies that the Shona used disability, which they knew people feared, as a means to ensure that the rules are holistically observed. On the same note, one can also say that these seemingly negative views on disability are in fact positive negatives as they were meant to accommodate people living with disability other than shunning them. Traditional Shona people valued communal life over individual existence. All they did was done communally and one’s problem was taken as a problem of the whole community.

## **Discussion**

There are different lessons to be learnt by modern society from traditional Shona societies.

Although attitudes toward people with disabilities in the traditional Shona societies were both positive and negative, there are many aspects that modern society can tap from traditional

society. It is important to note that even the negative attitudes of traditional Shona society towards people living with disability were meant to avoid ill-treatment of such members of society. The Shona discouraged people from looking down upon members of society living with disabilities and discouraged others from making disparaging remarks about their biological conditions. Such moral sanctions were enforced through threats or taboos. People were therefore discouraged through taboos from mocking people with disabilities (Masaka & Chemhuru, 2011). So, the modern society should tap the aspect of inclusion from the traditional society so as to accommodate the conditions and feelings of people with disabilities.

The Shona viewed people with disabilities as shining stars and hence modern society should also give people living with disability a chance to show their talents by giving them the voice to talk and time to express their capabilities. In traditional Shona societies, as was portrayed through folktales, opportunity was accorded to everyone as illustrated in the story of “The river girl”, “*Chinyamapezi*” and “The frog and the animal kingdom”. So, modern society should also accord opportunity to everyone to prove his or her talent. The Shona commonly believed that deformities are not inabilities. This was shown through the inclusion of characters with deformities and those without in the folktales. Such a witty selection of characters in the folktales was purposely done by the story teller to inculcate the spirit of inclusion of people with disabilities in traditional societies as well as showing that, despite disability, these people with disabilities had something they could do which those with no disability could not. Modern society should also have the same mentality. The desire to avoid prejudicial images about disability should be cultivated in the mind-set of modern societies. People living with disability should be given room to openly express their feelings and rights overtly, verbally and non-verbally, without any fear and segregation.

The use of taboos to do with disability by the traditional Shona societies was a mechanism to protect people with disability. For example, it was believed that if one laughed at a person with

disability, one would become disabled or one would bear children with disability, or if one imitated the way a lame person walked, one would become lame. Such taboos were used to protect and accept the condition of people with disability. The fear that the traditional Shona seem to have over having a disability was a result of extended love towards people with disability.

Shona sayings like *kune chirema hakuna rufu* (where there is a crippled person there is no death) were negative positives that were meant to shun disregard of the death of people with disability. The Shona also hold the view that there is no one who is useless as is portrayed by the saying *benzi rakareva hondo* (People were warned about the impending war by the mentally ill). This implies that, despite the condition of a person, everyone has a role to play in society. Families and communities with people with disabilities must accept disabled's condition and must not regard them as objects of charity. Modern society must be aware of its responsibilities and role to play towards people with disabilities and this awareness can only be seen through teaching and awareness campaigns. Teaching was the major tool that traditional Shona societies used to cultivate their beliefs, perspectives and worldviews as was seen through *ngano* and other witty sayings. People living with disability must be accorded inclusion in education, employment, cultural activities, festivals, sports, social events and access to health care. They should not be subjected to emotional abuse and neglect.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The rich legacy of traditional Shona societies must be tapped by modern society if we are to foster inclusion and acceptance of people living with disability in our day-to-day lives. Traditional Shona folktales and taboos have models and mechanisms that can be tapped into to help modern society integrate people living with disability in the mainstreams of human societies today. Modern societies should understand that people with disabilities are essential

to the wholeness of the human community. In a world that reveres physical perfection, denigrates bodily deformities, and takes pride in disposability, the rights and dignity of people with disabilities must be protected. The disabled are people created in God's image, possessing dignity, value, and purpose.

This paper attempted to navigate into the traditional Shona worldview, beliefs and perceptions of people living with disability and suggested ways that modern day society can learn in order to integrate and include people living with disability in the mainstream of human life and dignity.

The paper referred to and re-told insightful folktales and taboos which showed attitudes and perceptions of traditional Shona societies towards people living with disabilities. It is thus strongly recommended that modern society learns a lot from the traditional Shona societies on how to integrate and accommodate people living with disabilities. It is not right to despise and look down upon people living with disabilities.

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